



Written by on January 27, 2009

Another Busy Week in the Middle East

Shortly after the president's interview was broadcast, Palestinian militants killed an Israeli soldier and wounded three others in a bomb attack at the Kissufim crossing on Gaza-Israeli border. The attack interrupted the 10-day-old cease-fire in Gaza. Israel carried out a retaliatory air strike in the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis hours after the attack, reportedly wounding a Hamas militant. Israeli troops also entered Gaza following the bomb attack, and medics reported that one Palestinian had been killed.



The White House website posted the transcript of the president's interview, in which he said: "My job is to communicate to the American people that the Muslim world is filled with extraordinary people who simply want to live their lives and see their children live better lives. My job to the Muslim world is to communicate that the Americans are not your enemy."

Obama continued: "Sending George Mitchell to the Middle East is fulfilling my campaign promise that we're not going to wait until the end of my administration to deal with Palestinian and Israeli peace, we're going to start now. It may take a long time to do, but we're going to do it now."

Mitchell is a former United States Democratic senator from Maine who served as the Senate majority leader from 1989 to 1995. He was also chairman of the Walt Disney Company from March 2004 until January 2007. Though his father is of Irish descent, he classifies himself as an "Arab American" because his mother emigrated from Lebanon. He served as a U.S. special envoy to Northern Ireland and chaired negotiations that led to the 1998 Belfast peace agreement. He is the chancellor of Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Mitchell is also a member of the internationalist-minded Council on Foreign Relations.

Starting his tour in Egypt, Mitchell was scheduled to meet on Wednesday with President Hosni Mubarak. Agence France Presse observed that Egypt receives about two billion dollars a year in American aid — second only to Israel. AFP also noted that Egypt has taken a leading role in efforts to negotiate a permanent truce between Israel and Hamas, as well as having attempted to reconcile the extreme militant Hamas with their more moderate rivals, the Fatah faction headed by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas. Hamas controls Gaza, while Fatah is the dominant political authority in the West Bank.

Also on January 27, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit warned representatives of three European countries to reconsider any plans to send ships to patrol Gaza's coastal waters to prevent arms smuggling. "In my discussions with European foreign ministers yesterday, I warned them and said: 'You must understand Arab and Muslim feelings,'" Aboul Gheit was quoted by Reuters as saying after speaking in a news conference. He added that if such patrols were needed, they should be conducted by Israel, not European nations.

"I urge you to look and consider this ... because it might have consequences in Palestinian and Arab



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relations with you," said Aboul Gheit, after speaking with the EU's foreign policy chief Javier Solana.

The nations to which Aboul Gheit referred were Britain, France, and Germany, who have offered to send warships to the Gaza coast to monitor and prevent arms smuggling to the troubled territory.

While Egypt has played an important role in attempting to negotiate peace in Gaza, the nation has also closely guarded its sovereignty, and has refused to allow an international force to patrol the border between Egypt and Gaza.

— *Phottos: AP Images*



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